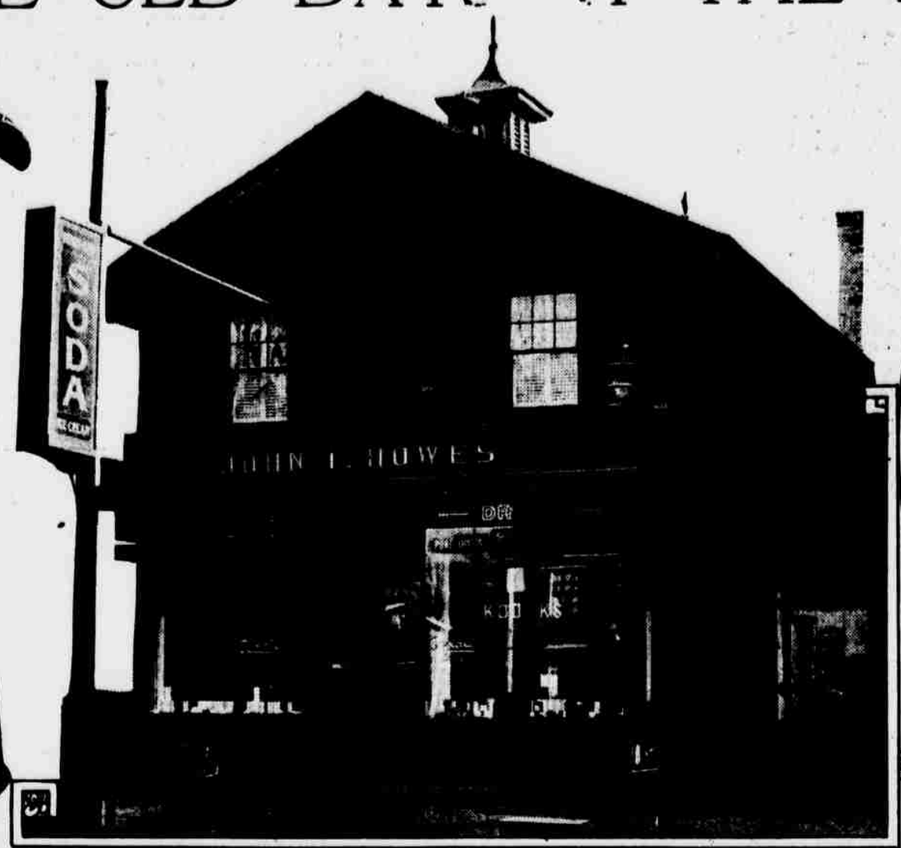
HARKING BACK TO THE OLD DAYS AT THE MILFORD CLUB

Founded in 1849, It Was Once Known From Maine to New Orleans as the Home of Good Fellowship, but Its Jealously Guarded History Is Now Told for the First Time

THE OLD PEWTER PITCHER
THE ORIGIN OF WHICH IS
LOST IN THE PAST



WHERE THE MILFORD CLUB HAS BEEN
HOUSED FOR MORE THAN FIFTY YEARS, SHOWING
THE OLD OUTSIDE STAIRS.

HARVEY
BEACH
THE OLDEST
LIVING MEMBER
OF THE
MILFORD CLUB.
PRESIDENT
1870-1875.

HISTORIC FRONT ROOM OF THE MILFORD CLUB, SHOWING DAGUERREOTYPES
OF CHARTER MEMBERS.

IT'S not much to look at: A flight of narrow, steep, well worn stairs up the outside of the old building, a knock at the shided door, and then one steps into a square, red room with a few comfortable chairs, an old round table and a cheery cylinder stove. That's all that meets the eye at first, but dimly one is conscious that here and there on the walls are faded pictures and prints, and it is in these that the club holds its treasures. These and its memories.

For once the Milford Club on the broad main street of that Connecticut town from which it takes its name was famed from Maine to New Orleans, from Boston to St. Louis, as the home of good fellowship and warm hospitality. The warmth of friendship and the hospitality of the club are as great now as in days of long ago before the war, but fewer persons are privileged to go there and the proud conservatism which has kept it alive these many years likewise has kept its legends and its long history from the profanation of public knowledge.

They talk of it when they gather around the fire of a Saturday night, these young men of an olden time, bearing names that figured in New England history when Milford was a shipping port and the railroad a dream of the future, and from the wall behind them look down the faces of the men they recall, daguerreotypes of the gay blades of 1849, the charter members of the club. The chokers, the old stocks with their length of wrapping, the whiskers and the gay waistcoats are not worn now, but the faces of past and present bear the same cheerful and kindly looks, and when Harvey Beach recalls how he drove over to New Haven on a momentous day of long ago to hear Lincoln speak in the campaign of 1860, he tugs at his little goatee and glances up with a twinkle at the faded picture of the man who took him.

An odd sensation of living in the past, of being part of the old days, came to one who sat with a few of the older members around the stove and listened to them. It was a good feeling. Some of the mellow atmosphere of that old room with its quaint mementos seemed to steal into one's heart and mind, bringing a sense of peace and quiet and simple living and of guileless pleasures that made life bright. They were very charming, these members of the Milford Club.

There was Albertus Clark, his long angular frame stretched in a big leather chair, his gnarled hands folded in his lap, long mustache drooping over the corner of his kindly mouth, his face lighting up with quiet good nature when he spoke. And Harvey Beach, his trim little figure, for all his eighty-one years, as upright as when fifty years ago he joined the club, his eyes twinkling as he took a chew of fine cut, which he remarked had been indorsed by Mr. Edison in THE SUN. And Harvey—they all of them call him that—is a relative of Moses Y. Beach, who owned THE SUN long ago, and he boasts that he has read it all his life. Then there was William Merwin, whose fine features and pleasant face give him an air of distinction and who says that really he hasn't been in the club very long, only twenty-one years. And W. B. Van Vliet and Judge Robert C. Stoddard and James P. Herrick were also among those who sat around and regarded this inquisitive stranger with some distrust lest he fail to show proper regard for their traditions.

But as the old stories grew young again with the telling, the far famed hospitality of the club melted the air of reserve, and the cheerful stove glowed and its red eyes winked, and it seemed as if the room was filing up again with those shadowy figures of the past, who looked down from the old fashioned frames till the room murmured with the echoes of their forgotten laughter in the convivial days when George Higgins Tibbals mixed the punches that made him famous, and genial Dr. Holmes's verses came true again:

Has there any old fellow got mixed with the boys?
If there has, take him out without making a noise.
Hang the almanac's cheat and the catalogue's spite!
Old Time is a liar! We're twenty to-night.

All young and vigorous men they were then, despite the air of premature gravity which their whiskers lent them, in those glorious days of Milford in 1849 when the club—it was the Higgins Club then—was formed. The little town on the Connecticut shore hummed with industry that brought men from all over the country.

Its harbor was filled with ships from the West Indies, its shipyard turned out brigs that sailed the seven seas. The railroad, that queer and scoffed at substitute for the good old coaches, was built through Milford that same year and the people gathered around the barrel stacked, wood burning engine as if it were the wonder of the world.

"And I remember going down to see," said Harvey, "and while the people were all around the engineer blew the whistle." He chuckled softly. "You ought to have seen them take to the woods; they thought the whole thing was going to explode. I was right with them. Oh, well, we're used to it now."

And Harvey looked sort of wistfully at the pictures as if he wished he were back there in the old days, sitting on a rail fence, watching the queer contraption that moved without horses.

The straw factory of Flagg & Baldwin was the principal industry of the place—most of the influential men of the place worked in it or in Asa and Eli Green's shipyard—and when the buyers of straw hats came there from the East and the West and the South they were entertained by the members of the firm and their employees, whose pleasure in making Milford a cheery place to stop in was no less than their pleasure in selling their hats. There was no social gulf between employer and employee then. They lived on the same street, chatted as they went to work, and at night sat together over the same table at the jollifications that made Milford a place to linger in a weary traveller's memory.

The entertainments were first held in the big room of Uncle Nate Merwin's tavern, and there, as the taverns and coffee houses of old London gave birth to Brook's and White's and other famous gathering places of the bucks of England, the modest but time hallowed Milford Club came into being. It was started at one of the Milford Thanksgiving Association dinners, which were held in Milford and New York, and at which the men of Milford and those who went down to the city to seek and generally to make their fortunes gathered every year to toast the elm shaded village in which they were born.

One of the things which the members of the Milford Club bring out with proper pride to show their guests is an old faded card which announces that the ninth annual festival of the Milford Thanksgiving Association will be held at Delmonico's Hotel, corner of Broadway and Chambers street, on Tuesday evening, December 30, 1856, at 6 o'clock. And lest any one have a mistaken notion about the importance of these functions it might be noted that the cost was $6 a plate, which rivals the cost of many more pretentious gatherings even now held in New York.

Well, some time at one of these gatherings back in Uncle Nate's tavern, which stood across the street from the little building where the Milford Club has been housed these fifty years, some one, perhaps that same George Higgins Tibbals, proposed that they form a club. And they did so and named it Higgins, after Tibbals himself, jovial host that he was.

There were Daniel Buckingham, master builder of the town, whose carved stairways and matelpieces over the big fireplaces are still objects of pride in many a Milford home; C. N. Berry, the superintendent of the factory; L. C. Baldwin, Charles A. Baldwin and Adam Baldwin, brothers; Nate Baldwin, a cousin and the founder of the straw factory; Jason Clark, a farmer; George Higgins Tibbals, who when he wasn't adding to the jollity of life in Uncle Nate's waited on customers at his grocery store; Tim N. Baldwin, secretary of the Thanksgiving Association, who died when he was only 36; William Atwater, Henry C. Miles, William S. Pond and Samuel A. Miles, who Harvey Beach recalled with another chuckle was imprisoned on Governors Island during the war because he liked New Orleans and talked about it so much that he was suspected of being a Southern sympathizer.

These were the founders, whose pictures, the old and faded daguerreotypes, hang on the wall of the Milford Club and smile down on their descendants around the stove of a winter's night. There were two others, but their pictures were lost and who they were has passed from the memory of even Harvey Beach. Good men they were, and they added much to the life of Milford, but records of none of their jolly evenings and those tremendous dinners they gave in Uncle Nate's have been preserved for the delectation of the present members, for they kept no minutes and the day was sufficient to them. But one who remembers something of them, George Cornwall, whose picture hangs in one of the frames to fill a vacancy, has written of them to Will Merwin, and his words give a slight suggestion of what the club was before the war.

"I regret that I cannot clearly see how any history of the Higgins Club can be written," he says. "You know it was purely a social club—all good fellows—who made this sometimes dreary world mighty bright and pleasant. But all this cannot be written, but must be told around the social board, like all old stories handed down from one good crowd to another.

"I am about the only living representative of that old club, once known from Boston on the north to New Orleans on the south and Chicago and St. Louis on the west. Yes, they are gone, and some may be twanging harps and some perhaps shovelling coal, but wherever they are or what they are doing I know if they should get thirsty not one would call for water.

"I hope they are all together and that old Higgins Tibbals is the mixer and when the boys call for punch George's hand, as in the old times, goes up to his ear as he says 'Reg'lar?' and the nod which means 'yes' goes down the line. The first supper was held in Uncle Nate's dining room. I do not remember the names of all the first members, but I do remember that supper."

One other reminder of those old days was found years ago up in the attic among a lot of rubbish and probably it is one of the few mementos of its kind in the country. It is a box of old poker chips, yellow and faded ivory, some of them colored green and purple and blue, of odd octagonal and rectangular shapes. On them are scribbled some of the names of the men who played with them before Lincoln was President, and some have faintly decipherable cuss words, parting inscriptions of players who after draw poker was invented drew to a bob tailed flush and didn't fill. There is the name of George Tibbals and William G. Mitchell and Charles Van Horn, who added, lest it be not known where he belonged, "Milford, Conn." They don't use the old chips now, for poker hasn't been played in the club since 1888.

From these days of 1849 the fame of the club grew fast and men fortunate enough to be welcomed as its guests looked forward eagerly to the time when their travels would bring them again to Milford. But any actual record of events is lost till 1857, for, mind you, there are only two clubs in New York city which antedate it, the Union, founded in 1836, and the Century, founded in 1846.

But in 1857 came an incident which is another of the treasured memories of the club. It was during one of those mantling snowfalls, which don't come any more, but which used to make New England winters seasons of strange and glittering beauty, the kind that Whittier wrote about:

A universe of sky and snow!
The old familiar sights of ours
Took marvellous shapes; stranges domes and towers
Rose up where sty or corn crib stood,
Or garden wall or belt of wood;
A smooth white mound the brush pile showed,
A fenceless drift what once was road;
The bridle post an old man sat
With loose flung coat and high cocked hat;
The well curb had a Chinese roof,
And even the long sweep, high aloof,
In its slant splendor, seemed to tell
Of Pisa's leaning miracle.

They are the winters that the young folks of 60 or 80 like to recall as they sit in the Milford Club, and some of them remember that January day of 1857 when the Boston mail train, snorting through the great drifts that piled higher and higher, gave a final despairing grunt and quit, to be drifted almost out of sight in Gunn's Cut, west of Milford. It was right near Bela Clark's crossing—that same Bela who ran a bar in his grocery store there and kept only one tumbler, so that folks had to wait some time between tipples.

The train was well filled, and the people of Milford took in the hungry and half frozen travellers and made them welcome, and the Higgins Club opened its doors to the thirty or so men and gave them food and what Harvey Beach calls "spiritual comfort." They stayed there three days until the storm subsided and the train could be dug out of its white bed and resume its journey to Boston, and those three days were memorable ones.

The storm might rage without as it pleased, but inside the club was a merrymaking such as only New England at that time might furnish. And some time after the travellers and the storm had gone there came a package to the club, and when it was opened there was a loving cup from Tiffany's, which at that time was at 550 Broadway, as any one may see by looking at the bottom of the goblet. It is of heavy hammered silver, with clusters of flowers beaten out on the sides, and on the front is the inscription:

"Presented to the Higgins Club of Milford, Conn., by passengers on the New York and Boston mail train of January 18, 1857, as a testimonial of gratitude for their hospitality."

So the cup, next to the frame of the charter members, has the place of honor in the room, and hangs in a case with a glass front. And in connection with this cup and the framed daguerreotypes a story can be told of a man, rather an important man, who was taken to the club one cold night for warmth and refreshment by another who had partaken of its hospitality and appreciated it. This man, the important man, climbed out of his automobile in his big fur coat, puffed up the flight of stairs and entered the little, plain red room.

"Oh, sort of a country club, isn't it?" he said, and walked around glancing at the pictures. He came to the framed daguerreotypes, looked at them and the inscriptions a long time, and then without a word passed on to where the cup rested and looked at that too. Finally he turned around.

"I apologize," he said, and there was a new tone in his voice. "I did not realize what your history was. I have been in a great many clubs in all parts of the country, but I never before saw framed a group of the charter members, least of all a group of men who go back so far beyond my time. You should be proud of your club."

So they forgave him and he went away vowing that the next time he came that way he would be honored if they would again permit him to pay them a visit.

The next thing that Harvey Beach can recall is the merging of the Hickory Club with the Higgins Club. That was back in 1860, and Harvey and Capt. Alfred Mallet are the only members of the Hickory Club who are left. The Hickory grew out of a wild organization of young men of the town called the Hyenas, who had their rooms over Charlie Platt's store. They got their name from the way in which they poured out of the rooms one night, and Mrs. George Pitt Merwin, going by, said:

"I should think you were a pack of hyenas."

They became more sedate after a time and renamed their club the Hickory, and in 1860 added to the membership of the Higgins Club. They brought with them the Hickory Club card table, which still stands in the middle of the front room of the Milford Club, close by the cylinder stove. It is a black bit of old wood, with shelves under the edge for glasses, and it bears marks of having been much in use in the old days. Harvey Beach tells with many chuckles of how he went down to New Haven and had the table made by an old cabinet maker of Puritan habits, who shook his head doubtfully when Harvey mentioned the shelves and said:

"I'm afraid you want it for the cup, young man, for the cup."

But he made it just the same, being a thorough New Englander so far as business was concerned.

Then came the war, when Albertus Clark and George Washington Tibbals, son of old Higgins Tibbals, marched away with the Twenty-seventh Connecticut, and many other young men of Milford town, and the club was sadly depleted for a while. Some of them came back and some of them didn't, but the work and play of Milford went on as before and the club again took an important place in its affairs. It has always been first and last a social club, but many a political powwow was held in those old rooms when some of the members were men of power in the affairs of the State.

There are many years whose events are lost save to the memories of a few old members, and even they recall them simply as years of good fellowship and pleasant evenings. As they died and went to join old Higgins Tibbals the club grew smaller and smaller, until thirty years ago only a few members held it together and kept the rooms for recollection's sake. They were reduced to four or five in 1888 and then the great blizzard of that year brought renewed life to the Higgins Club.

For there were so few in the old rooms that they got rather lonesome and it was proposed to let in some of the younger men of the town to keep alive the traditions. So the Milford Club, composed of younger men, now grown old in their turn, was merged with the Higgins Club and took the name of the younger organization. And it cannot be said that the club has suffered by the change, for those men who came into the club rooms soon learned to love them because of their history and they have worthily preserved its hospitality and spirit of fellowship.

That year was bought the old billiard table which stands in the back room—there are only two rooms—a table of odd inlay work and massive legs carved into the semblance of crouching lions. It was built for exhibition at the World's Fair in Chicago and is one of the oldest tables in the country, and in just as good condition now as when it was first used.

Then they also began to keep a minute book and framed a set of by-laws, a section of which provides that "the game known as poker shall not be played in the club." And another section sets forth that any one revealing anything that goes on in the club rooms shall be suspended. So the secrecy which surrounds the doings of the club, which makes it possible for the members even to hold their annual dinners without mention in the local paper, is easily explained. Also the reluctance with which they permitted any one to invade their rooms for the purpose of revealing their history can be understood.

This room is nearly as interesting as the one in front of it. There are the old billiard table, a few prints on the walls, an odd little shelf on which Higgins Tibbals mixed his punches, another of those comfortable cylinder stoves, and in one corner on a little stand one of the mysterious treasures of the club.

It is a pewter water pitcher bearing on the front the inscription "Higgins Club, 1857." There is a reproduction of a brig, perhaps one of those which traded with the West Indies, sailing between two queer pillars of stone. The pitcher is of odd construction and might be taken to be the original of the present heat preserving bottles, as it has a double wall, the purpose of which was to keep moisture from forming on the outside when it held iced water.

Just where it came from nobody knows. It was dug out of some rubbish in the cellar of William Merwin's home years ago by "Judge" Spence, a darky of all trades, and Spence tucked it away under the stairs of the store next door where he had what he called his office. There is was found by Mr. Merwin a few years ago when the interior of the store was changed, and he cleaned it up and restored it to its place of honor on Higgins Tibbals's shelf. It is never used now, but many a discussion is held as to its probable origin, for not even Harvey Beach remembers from where it originally came.

There are pictures in the front room too which are so old that no one knows who presented them to the club. Perhaps the oldest is a painting depicting the surrender of Cornwallis, so faded that across the room it is merely a blur. On the back of it is recorded an election bet of 1860, and there was considerable excitement when that was found on the occasion of the visit of the present chronicler, for no one knew it was there. Then there are old prints of Washington, and the signing of the Declaration of Independence and other events in the early history of the country.

No account of the club would be complete without a mention of some of the members who go there now when they have the opportunity and sit around the stove. They are from all walks of life, but when they enter the club they leave professional and business distinctions behind them, forget that some are old, some merely middle aged and some mere children of 30; call one another by their first names, dismiss everything but the social satisfaction of being together and telling stories and existing as a happy family of youths who never grow old.

We've a trick, we young fellows, you may have been told,
Of talking (in public) as if we were old;
That boy we call "Doctor" and this one call "Judge";
It's a neat little fiction—of course it's all fudge.

That fellow's the "Speaker"—the one on the right;
"Mr. Mayor," my young one, how are you to-night?"
"That's our Member of Congress," we say when we chaff;
There's the "Reverend," what's his name—don't make me laugh.

The president of the club is William F. Platt, the representative of Milford in the Connecticut Legislature; David Greene, a coal merchant, is secretary; Clifford E. Smith, president of the Board of Police Commissioners, is treasurer; William A. Merwin, chairman of the House Committee, is just William A. Merwin, inimitable watcher of bees in a corner and good fellow. And some of the other members are:

W. Cecil Durand, treasurer of the Milford Savings Bank; James P. Herrick, president of the Milford Lumber Company; Robert C. Stoddard, Judge of the Town Court; Charles W. Ellarts, County Health Officer and ex-State Senator; Harry C. Usher, cashier of the Mechanics Bank of New Haven; M. J. Cheney, First Town Selectman; Omar W. Platt, Judge of Probate; Percival W. Hine, Police Commissioner; E. W. Coe, Assessor; Dr. G. K. Healy, E. B. Holloway, Arthur M. Cohn, A. E. Gould, J. H. Barnes, J. D. Brown, Jr., W. B. Brotherton, George M. Gunn, president of the National Tradesman's Bank of New Haven; Nicholas M. Pond of New York; B. W. Chatfield and Max Duerschmidt of Derby; George A. Mallory, Sheriff of the county; James E. C. Leavitt of Pelham Manor, George W. Miles of Boston, Dr. George W. Carroll of Bridgeport, Clifford M. Peck of New Haven, Kenneth Wynne, former secretary to Gov. Baldwin; Dr. Willis M. Crowe of New Haven; George E. Reynolds of St. Louis, Mo.; F. G. Tibbals, Simon Lake, the submarine builder, and George I. Stanford.

ANOTHER BORDER MENACE

FIFTY MILLIONS of dollars is the amount of damage done to the cotton crop of this country every year though the attacks of sundry insects, and it is now threatened by another enemy. This is the pink boll worm, which is working its way northward in Mexico toward the boundary.

Four years ago American cotton growers narrowly escaped the grave consequences of a pink boll worm invasion and the incident is of special interest because it shows how many gateways are open to an incursion of this kind. At that time 500 pounds of Egyptian cotton seed reached Arizona. The State entomologist, Dr. A. W. Morrill, discovered that the seed was heavily infested by the pink boll worm. He took no chances and the entire shipment was at once destroyed by fire. Had those pink boll worms been let loose they might have caused much damage in Arizona at once and might have spread through the cotton belt.

The pink boll worm is a relatively new cotton pest and apparently had its origin in India. It reached Egypt something like eight years ago. The widespread demand for Egyptian cotton has made it comparatively easy for the worm to travel to substantially all of the cotton producing countries except the United States. Now that it has got a firm foothold in Mexico, it has started northward toward the Southern States. It is declared by experts that the pink boll worm's capacity to work damage far exceeds that of the boll weevil, and the Department of Agriculture specifically declares that the establishment of the pest in Mexico presents one of the greatest menaces which have come to American cotton culture during the history of that industry.

The United States imports from $20,000,000 to $50,000,000 worth of cotton annually, and these importations afford chances to the pink boll worm to get into this country. But the danger is augmented by the spread of the worm in Mexico.

The Laguna district where the insect has lately been discovered is one of the most important cotton growing areas in Mexico. It is an elevated plateau region near San Pedro in the central part of the northern section of Mexico. Cotton culture is more intensively carried on there than anywhere else in Mexico, and the importance of the pink boll worm's ravages unlikely the consequence of any effort to improve the native cotton by importing seed from Egypt and other foreign sources.

The discovery that the worm had secured a foothold in Mexico was due to a planter in the Laguna district who sent to the Federal Horticultural Board some cotton bolls from his plantation which he supposed were infested only with the common boll weevil. An examination disclosed the disquieting fact that the infesting insect was the pink boll worm of Egypt and India.

The pink boll worm hibernates in the larval state, in the cotton seed and because of this habit is easily carried to any quarter of the world by seed exportation. Hidden in this way it is very apt to escape a more casual or superficial examination.

The adult insect is a small moth. The worm attacks the immature cotton bolls and in severe cases is known to reduce the yield quite 50 per cent. In addition to this the money value obtained from the seed of the cotton is reduced anywhere from 10 to 20 per cent.